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Mr S Goldthorpe
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Dear Mr Goldthorpe

Ofsted 2009-10 survey inspection programme: good practice in apprenticeship training

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12 November 2009 to look at good practice in construction apprenticeship training.

The visit provided valuable information that will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: a tele-conference with directors and senior managers; discussions with learners, training advisers and key members of staff; and the observation of training sessions, resources and training facilities at the Leeds Academy.

Features of good practice

- The maintenance of very high success rates over several years.

Almost all apprentices who start training achieve full framework qualifications and become qualified gas engineers. Over the past four years, overall success rates have been in excess of 95%. Almost all apprentices complete and achieve their qualifications by their planned end dates. Exceptionally rigorous selection procedures ensure recruitment of learners with the ability to complete all qualifications successfully. The well-planned and highly structured training, together with challenging targets and thorough monitoring, ensure that learners are kept on track and achieve well.

- Excellent resources that enable learners to quickly become productive in the workplace.

All academies have a wide range of gas installations covering anything that a learner is likely to encounter in the workplace. These are set in realistic

simulations of domestic properties. Learners develop high levels of technical and practical skills while completing complex tasks under the supervision of their training advisers. Workshops and classrooms have state-of-the-art equipment which aids learning. Learners are provided with a laptop computer installed with technical manuals and interactive learning materials, a full set of tools, a mobile telephone and a company vehicle. They become productive on-site at a very early stage in their training.

- Well-planned and thorough assessment enabling learners to progress quickly.

Assessment is planned carefully throughout the individual learners' programme. Learners work on a wide range of appliances and installations and are assessed when ready. Assessment is carried out frequently in the academies and in the workplace. In the very few instances when learners fail an assessment, contingency plans, including extra training, coaching and assessment, are quickly put in place. Well-devised and relevant project work helps learners to develop trade skills, technical knowledge and key skills. Assessments are recorded on an accessible monitoring system.

- Development of learners' confidence, personal and team-working skills through additional activities and training.

All learners take the Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award which helps to develop a company culture of respect, team working and personal development. During induction, learners complete a residential course where outdoor activities help the group to bond together. Learners complete a period of volunteering in charitable organisations, for example, working with children with disabilities, older people or disadvantaged groups in the community. Learners also set themselves challenging targets to improve their health and well-being. At the end of the programme, learners complete an expedition where they have to overcome challenges through working together with limited resources and support. Learners enjoy participating in the programme. They say it has enabled them to develop high levels of self-confidence and team-working skills. Teams of learners take part in a British Gas project 'Challenge India' where they help to build schools and other facilities for children in India.

- Good progression for apprentices within the company.

Many apprentices progress to senior positions. Several leaders and many managers began their careers at British Gas as apprentices. Around 70% of those in management positions started as apprentices.

- Good support and mentoring of learners throughout their training and initial employment.

Learners receive excellent support and coaching from academy training officers responsible for groups of learners, enabling most to make good progress. On-site mentors for each learner provide coaching in the workplace. Learners receive weekly progress reports which help to identify any additional support needs. On completion of the advanced apprenticeship programme,

learners receive support from experienced colleagues as newly qualified gas engineers.

- Strong leadership and good management of training resulting in high success rates and acquisition of skills by learners.

The strategic direction of training is understood clearly by all staff. Managers foster a critical and high-performance culture which sets challenging targets for learners and staff. Senior and middle managers are passionate about training. A strong and improving trend of success rates has been consistently maintained. Detailed programmes show the links between each stage of on- and off-the-job training. Learners quickly develop skills and knowledge in fault diagnosis and gas installation. The progress of each learner is monitored throughout training and extra support is given where required. Teaching and learning are given a high priority and have improved.

- Effective strategies to promote training to underrepresented groups.

Innovative advertising has targeted recruitment of women and those from minority ethnic groups. This positive action has significantly increased applications from these groups. The representation of learners from minority ethnic groups has increased considerably from 4% in 2002 to 15% in 2009. The proportion of women apprentices has also increased considerably from 3% in 2002 to 15% in 2009. The success of this initiative has helped British Gas to make progress against their objective of changing the face of their workforce to reflect the diversity of their customer base.

Areas for development

- Completion of teaching qualifications for staff involved in the delivery of training.

Only a small proportion of teaching staff has recognised teaching qualifications. British Gas has identified this shortcoming and several staff are already recruited on the preparing to teach in the lifelong learning sector (PTLLS) course, with more to follow.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop apprenticeship training in your organisation.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Michael Berry
Her Majesty's Inspector